

Sunday 21A

SFX 2023

There is a lot in today's Gospel. Peter speaks up for us when he acknowledges the identity of Jesus saying: *"You are the Christ..., the Son of the living God."* Simon in his turn is given a new identity. He is to be Cephas, Peter, Petrus, the Rock. The one with the power of the keys, to bind and loose. Peter clearly had a prominent position of authority in the early Church, since early times seen as continuing in the position of the Bishop of Rome, who is to 'abide in love' over the whole church. And still in today's church and amongst churches the Bishop of Rome is an important symbol of authority and source of unity.

"On this rock I will build my Church." Peter is the rock, but what is this 'church' but what is this church that Jesus wants to build. The Greek word *ἐκκλησία* means 'assembly, congregation or gathering' it is not about buildings, but a community of believers, a gathering of the faithful that continues throughout history. The church that continues to present Jesus to the world.

Why do some people today say: *"I don't need to go to church. I can be a Christian all on my own."* It is curious to say that when Jesus quite clearly formed his disciples to be a community of faith. Perhaps he saw that we need each other, to support, to encourage, to witness. Even when St Paul was called on the road to Damascus it wasn't to live some solitary or individualistic relationship with the Lord, he went immediately to Damascus to be baptized in his local church. His letters don't make sense if not addressed to communities, assemblies of the faithful, and he acknowledges Peter to have a special role in one of those churches, Antioch.

I don't need to go to Church to be a Christian some people say. But Christianity is not a thing of the mind, it is something that has to be embodied. We are not angels, we live among men. And Christ gave us sacraments, concrete, down-to-earth, physical ways to embody the presence of God in love and mercy amongst his people. Bread, wine, oil, water. It is person to person. *"Where two or three are gathered, there am I in the midst of them"* says Jesus. We come to Church to meet Jesus in the Eucharist, to hear his word speak directly to us, we come in obedience to his command: *"Do this in memory of me."* Gather, remember my sacrifice, my cross, my resurrection. Celebrate love, forgiveness and peace. Do this in memory of me.

Last week people were delighting that the English women's soccer team almost became world champions. Wouldn't it be odd if people if people said: *"I don't need to be part of a team to play soccer."* I'll play it on my own. Anyone can kick a ball around, but the game itself is intrinsically social. Life is intrinsically social. It is a team sport, just as the Christian faith has to be lived in relationship.

There are lots of things you or I might not like about going to church, you might not like the choice of hymns, you might not like the priest. You thought you might be in a church of saints but found yourself with a gang of sinners instead. Or you might have hoped to be in a church of sinners – much more congenial – but got bothered by saints. But this congregation this gathering is the body of Christ. *Called to be holy, and spotless and to live through love in God's presence.* Called to be a holy people, a pilgrim people.

During the third Eucharistic Prayer I pray on your behalf: *"Listen graciously to the prayers of this family, whom you have summoned before you."* That is what the church is – a family gathered before the Lord. Look around and see – the old and the young, the bright-eyed, the sleepy, different characters, different complexions, different faces. With eyes that reveal struggle and pain, joy and hope.

Gathered today with our present struggles and causes for celebration. Gathered to hear the word of the Lord and try to live his teaching. Gathered to receive the Body and Blood of the Lord at this altar and praying that we may embody his love in the world, live with a spirit of sacrifice. Gathered because we live not just for ourselves but something greater. Gathered to celebrate our saints – living and dead., gathered to become saints. Gathered to kneel, bow and adore a mystery that is beyond ourselves, a God whom we only dimly see in this world and yet we hold close to our hearts in hope for all eternity. Our beginning and our end, our alpha and our omega.

We need to gather. The disembodiment of covid is over. What damage that period did when we couldn't come together in person, when we could only look at screens and not be present to each other in the flesh. Jesus showed us in the incarnation the importance of flesh and blood. *It wasn't to the angels that he took to himself. He took to himself descent from Abraham.* We are a flesh and blood people, worshipping a God who by taking on our flesh has showed us the way.

When St Augustine was converted and baptised by St Ambrose in Milan he first thought he could be a Christian alone. He wanted to retire with his books, to be a philosopher, to live with his mind. He thought the Christian journey was – to use the Greek phrase – *'the flight of the alone to the alone.'* But then he discovered that to be a Christian he had to be embedded in the church, the living, breathing body of Christ. To be made a bishop was an honour – but the most important thing was to be a Christian amongst other Christians. To live and to love in community. The church is not an abstraction, it is the pilgrim people, wending its way like a river through history. When Augustine was young he prayed to be alone with his mind, but the mature Augustine prayed to have friends, to live in a genuine community of care and compassion. The Church, the living, breathing body of Christ on earth.

No one becomes a Christian on their own, we are born and nurtured in our faith by the people of God. And we continue to gather for a reason. We can't be Christian's on our own.